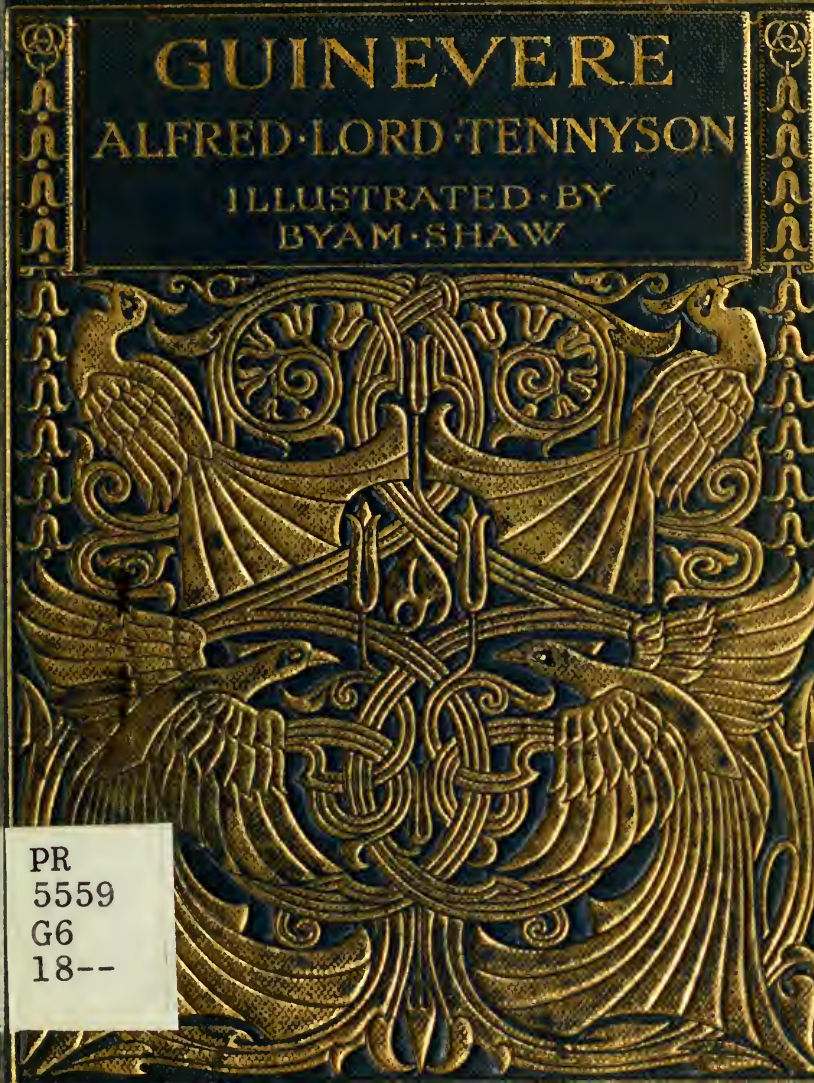


GUINEVERE

ALFRED · LORD · TENNYSON

ILLUSTRATED · BY
BYAM · SHAW




PR
5559
G6
18--



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GUINEVERE



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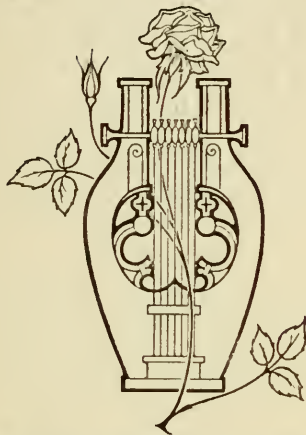


9.

. . . It was their last hour

GUINEVERE
ALFRED · LORD · TENNYSON

ILLUSTRATED · BY
BYAM · SHAW



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LONDON
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PR

5559

G6

18--

GUINEVERE

QUEEN GUINEVERE had fled the court,
and sat

There in the holy house at Almesbury
Weeping, none with her save a little maid,
A novice : one low light betwixt them burn'd
Blurr'd by the creeping mist, for all abroad,
Beneath a moon unseen albeit at full,
The white mist, like a face-cloth to the face,
Clung to the dead earth, and the land was
still.

For hither had she fled, her cause of flight
Sir Modred ; he the nearest to the King,
His nephew, ever like a subtle beast
Lay couchant with his eyes upon the throne,
Ready to spring, waiting a chance : for this,
He chill'd the popular praises of the King

GUINEVERE

With silent smiles of slow disparagement ;
And tamper'd with the Lords of the White
Horse,
Heathen, the brood by Hengist left ; and
sought
To make disruption in the Table Round
Of Arthur, and to splinter it into feuds
Serving his traitorous end ; and all his aims
Were sharpen'd by strong hate for Lancelot.

For thus it chanced one morn when all
the court,
Green-suited, but with plumes that mock'd
the may,
Had been, their wont, a-maying and return'd,
That Modred still in green, all ear and eye,
Climb'd to the high top of the garden wall
To spy some secret scandal if he might,
And saw the Queen, who sat betwixt her
best
Enid, and lissome Vivien, of her court

GUINEVERE

The wiliest and the worst; and more than
this

He saw not, for Sir Lancelot passing by
Spied where he couch'd, and as the gardener's
hand

Picks from the colewort a green caterpillar,
So from the high wall and the flowering grove
Of grasses Lancelot pluck'd him by the heel,
And cast him as a worm upon the way ;
But when he knew the Prince tho' marr'd
with dust,

He, reverencing king's blood in a bad man,
Made such excuses as he might, and these
Full knightly without scorn; for in those
days

No knight of Arthur's noblest dealt in scorn ;
But, if a man were halt or hunch'd, in him
By those whom God had made full-limb'd and
tall,

Scorn was allow'd as part of his defect,
And he was answer'd softly by the King

GUINEVERE

And all his Table. So Sir Lancelot help
To raise the Prince, who rising, twice or
thrice

Full sharply smote his knees, and smiled, and
went :

But, ever after, the small violence done
Rankled in him and ruffled all his heart,
As the sharp wind that ruffles all day long
A little bitter pool about a stone
On the bare coast.

But when Sir Lancelot told
This matter to the Queen, at first she laugh'd
Lightly, to think of Modred's dusty fall,
Then shudder'd, as the village wife who cries
'I shudder, some one steps across my grave ;'
Then laugh'd again, but faintlier, for indeed
She half-foresaw that he, the subtle beast,
Would track her guilt until he found, and
hers

Would be for evermore a name of scorn.
Henceforward rarely could she front in Hall,

GUINEVERE

Or elsewhere, Modred's narrow foxy face,
Heart-hiding smile, and gray persistent eye :
Henceforward too, the Powers that tend the
soul,

To help it from the death that cannot die,
And save it even in extremes, began
To vex and plague her. Many a time for
hours,

Beside the placid breathings of the King,
In the dead night, grim faces came and
went

Before her, or a vague spiritual fear—
Like to some doubtful noise of creaking doors,
Heard by the watcher in a haunted house,
That keeps the rust of murder on the walls—
Held her awake : or if she slept, she dream'd
An awful dream ; for then she seem'd to stand
On some vast plain before a setting sun,
And from the sun there swiftly made at her
A ghastly something, and its shadow flew
Before it, till it touch'd her, and she turn'd—

GUINEVERE

When lo ! her own, that broadening from her
feet,
And blackening, swallow'd all the land, and
in it
Far cities burnt, and with a cry she woke.
And all this trouble did not pass but grew ;
Till ev'n the clear face of the guileless King,
And trustful courtesies of household life,
Became her bane ; and at the last she said,
' O Lancelot, get thee hence to thine own
land,
For if thou tarry we shall meet again,
And if we meet again, some evil chance
Will make the smouldering scandal break
and blaze
Before the people, and our lord the King.'
And Lancelot ever promised, but remain'd,
And still they met and met. Again she
said,
' O Lancelot, if thou love me get thee hence.'
And then they were agreed upon a night

GUINEVERE

(When the good King should not be there) to
meet

And part for ever. Passion-pale they met
And greeted : hands in hands, and eye to eye,
Low on the border of her couch they sat
Stammering and staring : it was their last
hour,

A madness of farewells. And Modred brought
His creatures to the basement of the tower
For testimony ; and crying with full voice
'Traitor, come out, ye are trapt at last,'
aroused

Lancelot, who rushing outward lionlike
Leapt on him, and hurl'd him headlong, and
he fell

Stunn'd, and his creatures took and bare him
off

And all was still : then she, 'The end is come
And I am shamed for ever ;' and he said,
'Mine be the shame ; mine was the sin : but
rise,

GUINEVERE

And fly to my strong castle overseas :
There will I hide thee, till my life shall end,
There hold thee with my life against the
world.'

She answer'd, 'Lancelot, wilt thou hold me
so?

Nay, friend, for we have taken our farewells.
Would God, that thou could'st hide me from
myself!

Mine is the shame, for I was wife, and thou
Unwedded : yet rise now, and let us fly,
For I will draw me into sanctuary,
And bide my doom.' So Lancelot got her
horse,

Set her thereon, and mounted on his own,
And then they rode to the divided way,
There kiss'd, and parted weeping : for he past,
Love-loyal to the least wish of the Queen,
Back to his land ; but she to Almesbury
Fled all night long by glimmering waste and
weald,

GUINEVERE

And heard the Spirits of the waste and weald
Moan as she fled, or thought she heard them
moan :

And in herself she moan'd, 'Too late, too late!'
Till in the cold wind that foreruns the morn,
A blot in heaven, the Raven, flying high,
Croak'd, and she thought, 'He spies a field
of death ;

For now the Heathen of the Northern Sea,
Lured by the crimes and frailties of the court,
Begin to slay the folk, and spoil the land.'

And when she came to Almesbury she spake
There to the nuns, and said, 'Mine enemies
Pursue me, but, O peaceful Sisterhood,
Receive, and yield me sanctuary, nor ask
Her name, to whom ye yield it, till her time
To tell you,' and her beauty, grace and power,
Wrought as a charm upon them, and they
spared
To ask it.

GUINEVERE

So the stately Queen abode
For many a week, unknown, among the
nuns ;
Nor with them mix'd, nor told her name, nor
sought,
Wrapt in her grief, for housel or for shrift,
But communed only with the little maid,
Who pleased her with a babbling heedlessness
Which often lured her from herself ; but now,
This night, a rumour wildly blown about
Came, that Sir Modred had usurped the
realm,
And leagued him with the heathen, while the
King
Was waging war on Lancelot : then she
thought,
'With what a hate the people and the King
Must hate me,' and bow'd down upon her
hands
Silent, until the little maid, who brook'd
No silence, brake it, uttering 'Late ! so late !

GUINEVERE

What hour, I wonder, now?' and when she
drew

No answer, by and by began to hum
An air the nuns had taught her; 'Late, so
late!'

Which when she heard, the Queen look'd up,
and said,

'O maiden, if indeed you list to sing,
Sing, and unbind my heart that I may
weep.'

Whereat full willingly sang the little maid.

"Late, late, so late! and dark the night and
chill!

Late, late, so late! but we can enter still.
Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

"No light had we: for that we do repent;
And learning this, the bridegroom will
relent.

Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now.

GUINEVERE

“No light : so late ! and dark and chill the
night !

O let us in, that we may find the light !
Too late, too late : ye cannot enter now.

“Have we not heard the bridegroom is so
sweet ?

O let us in, tho' late, to kiss his feet !
No, no, too late ! ye cannot enter now.”

So sang the novice, while full passionately,
Her head upon her hands, remembering
Her thought when first she came, wept the
sad Queen.

Then said the little novice prattling to her :

‘O pray you, noble lady, weep no more ;
But let my words, the words of one so small,
Who knowing nothing knows but to obey,
And if I do not there is penance given—
Comfort your sorrows ; for they do not flow

GUINEVERE

From evil done ; right sure am I of that,
Who see your tender grace and stateliness.
But weigh your sorrows with our lord the
King's,

And weighing find them less ; for gone is he
To wage grim war against Sir Lancelot there,
Round that strong castle where he holds the
Queen ;

And Modred whom he left in charge of all,
The traitor—Ah, sweet lady, the King's grief
For his own self, and his own Queen, and
realm,

Must needs be thrice as great as any of ours.
For me, I thank the saints, I am not great.
For if there ever come a grief to me
I cry my cry in silence, and have done :
None knows it, and my tears have brought
me good :

But even were the griefs of little ones
As great as those of great ones, yet this grief
Is added to the griefs the great must bear,

GUINEVERE

That howsoever much they may desire
Silence, they cannot weep behind a cloud :
As even here they talk at Almesbury
About the good King and his wicked Queen,
And were I such a King with such a Queen,
Well might I wish to veil her wickedness,
But were I such a King, it could not be.'

Then to her own sad heart mutter'd the
Queen,
'Will the child kill me with her innocent
talk?'
But openly she answer'd, 'Must not I,
If this false traitor have displaced his lord,
Grieve with the common grief of all the
realm?'

'Yea,' said the maid, 'this is all woman's
grief,
That *she* is woman, whose disloyal life
Hath wrought confusion in the Table Round

GUINEVERE

Which good King Arthur founded, years ago,
With signs and miracles and wonders, there
At Camelot, ere the coming of the Queen.'

Then thought the Queen within herself
again ;

'Will the child kill me with her foolish prate?'

But openly she spake and said to her ;

'O little maid, shut in by nunnery walls,

What canst thou know of Kings and Tables
Round,

Or what of signs and wonders, but the signs

And simple miracles of thy nunnery?'

To whom the little novice garrulously,

'Yea, but I know : the land was full of signs

And wonders ere the coming of the Queen.

So said my father, and himself was knight

Of the great Table—at the founding of it ;

And rode thereto from Lyonesse, and he said

That as he rode, an hour or maybe twain

GUINEVERE

After the sunset, down the coast, he heard
Strange music, and he paused and turning—
there,

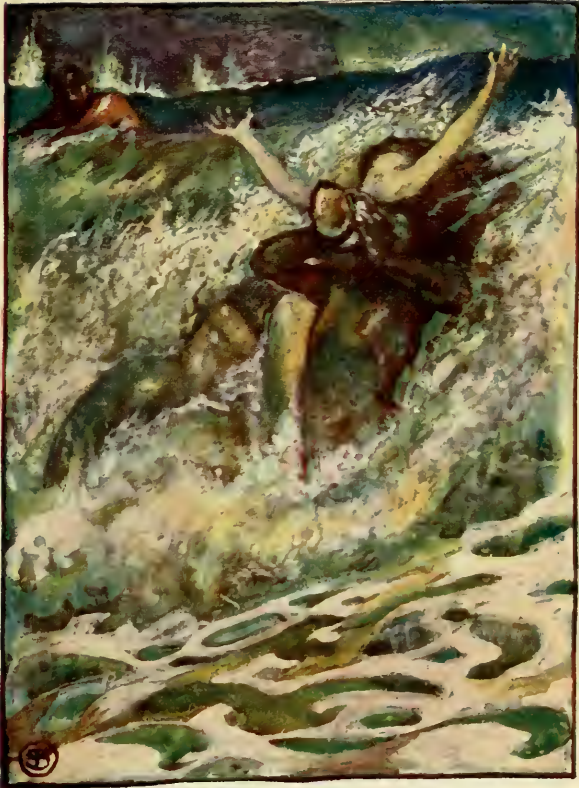
All down the lonely coast of Lyonesse,
Each with a beacon-star upon his head,
And with a wild sea-light about his feet,
He saw them—headland after headland flame
Far on into the rich heart of the west :

And in the light the white mermaiden swam,
And strong man-breasted things stood from
the sea,

And sent a deep sea-voice thro' all the land,
To which the little elves of chasm and cleft
Made answer, sounding like a distant horn.

So said my father—yea, and furthermore,
Next morning, while he past the dim-lit
woods,

Himself beheld three spirits mad with joy
Come dashing down on a tall wayside flower,
That shook beneath them, as the thistle
shakes



9.

And strong man-breasted things stood from the sea.

GUINEVERE

When three gray linnets wrangle for the
seed :

And still at evenings on before his horse
The flickering fairy-circle wheel'd and broke
Flying, and link'd again, and wheel'd and
broke

Flying, for all the land was full of life.

And when at last he came to Camelot,
A wreath of airy dancers hand-in-hand
Swung round the lighted lantern of the
hall ;

And in the hall itself was such a feast
As never man had dream'd ; for every knight
Had whatsoever meat he long'd for served
By hands unseen ; and even as he said
Down in the cellars merry bloated things
Shoulder'd the spigot, straddling on the
butts

While the wine ran : so glad were spirits and
men

Before the coming of the sinful Queen.'

GUINEVERE

Then spake the Queen and somewhat
bitterly.

‘Were they so glad? ill prophets were they
all,

Spirits and men: could none of them foresee,
Not even thy wise father with his signs
And wonders, what has fall’n upon the
realm?’

To whom the novice garrulously again.

‘Yea, one, a bard; of whom my father said,

Full many a noble war-song had he sung,

Ev’n in the presence of an enemy’s fleet,

Between the steep cliff and the coming
wave;

And many a mystic lay of life and death

Had chanted on the smoky mountain-tops,

When round him bent the spirits of the hills

With all their dewy hair blown back like
flame:

So said my father—and that night the bard

GUINEVERE

Sang Arthur's glorious wars, and sang the
King

As well-nigh more than man, and rail'd at
those

Who call'd him the false son of Gorlois :
For there was no man knew from whence
he came ;

But after tempest, when the long wave
broke

All down the thundering shores of Bude and
Boss,

There came a day as still as heaven, and
then

They found a naked child upon the sands
Of wild Dundagil by the Cornish sea ;

And that was Arthur ; and they foster'd him
Till he by miracle was approven king :

And that his grave should be a mystery
From all men, like his birth ; and could he
find

A woman in her womanhood as great

GUINEVERE

As he was in his manhood, then, he sang,
The twain together well might change the
world.

But even in the middle of his song
He falter'd, and his hand fell from the
harp,

And pale he turn'd, and reel'd, and would
have fall'n,

But that they stay'd him up; nor would
he tell

His vision; but what doubt that he foresaw
This evil work of Lancelot and the Queen?'

Then thought the Queen 'Lo! they have
set her on,

Our simple-seeming Abbess and her nuns,
To play upon me,' and bow'd her head nor
spake.

Whereat the novice crying, with clasp'd
hands,

Shame on her own garrulity garrulously,

GUINEVERE

Said the good nuns would check her gadding
tongue

Full often, 'And, sweet lady, if I seem
To vex an ear too sad to listen to me,
Unmannerly, with prattling and the tales
Which my good father told me, check me
too :

Nor let me shame my father's memory, one
Of noblest manners, tho' himself would say
Sir Lancelot had the noblest ; and he died,
Kill'd in a tilt, come next, five summers back,
And left me ; but of others who remain,
And of the two first famed for courtesy—
And pray you check me if I ask amiss—
But pray you, which had noblest, while
you moved

Among them, Lancelot or our lord the King ?'

Then the pale Queen look'd up and
answer'd her.

'Sir Lancelot, as became a noble knight,

GUINEVERE

Was gracious to all ladies, and the same
In open battle or the tilting-field
Forbore his own advantage, and the King
In open battle or the tilting-field
Forbore his own advantage, and these two
Were the most nobly-mannered men of all ;
For manners are not idle, but the fruit
Of loyal nature, and of noble mind.'

'Yea,' said the maid, 'be manners such fair
fruit?

Then Lancelot's needs must be a thousand-
fold

Less noble, being, as all rumour runs,
The most disloyal friend in all the world.

To which a mournful answer made the
Queen.

'O closed about by narrowing nunnery-walls,
What knowest thou of the world, and all its
lights

GUINEVERE

And shadows, all the wealth and all the woe?
If ever Lancelot, that most noble knight,
Were for one hour less noble than himself,
Pray for him that he scape the doom of fire,
And weep for her, who drew him to his doom.'

'Yea,' said the little novice, 'I pray for
both ;

But I should all as soon believe that his,
Sir Lancelot's, were as noble as the King's,
As I could think, sweet lady, yours would be
Such as they are, were you the sinful Queen.'

So she, like many another babbler, hurt
Whom she would soothe, and harm'd where
she would heal ;

For here a sudden flush of wrathful heat
Fired all the pale face of the Queen, who
cried,

'Such as thou art be never maiden more
For ever ! thou their tool, set on to plague

GUINEVERE

And play upon, and harry me, petty spy
And traitress.' When that storm of anger
 brake

From Guinevere, aghast the maiden rose,
White as her veil, and stood before the Queen
As tremulously as foam upon the beach
Stands in a wind, ready to break and fly,
And when the Queen had added 'get thee
 hence'

Fled frightened. Then that other left alone
Sigh'd, and began to gather heart again,
Saying in herself 'The simple, fearful child
Meant nothing, but my own too-fearful guilt
Simpler than any child, betrays itself.
But help me, heaven, for surely I repent.
For what is true repentance but in thought—
Not ev'n in inmost thought to think again
The sins that made the past so pleasant
 to us:

And I have sworn never to see him more,
To see him more.'

GUINEVERE

And ev'n in saying this,
Her memory from old habit of the mind
Went slipping back upon the golden days
In which she saw him first, when Lancelot
 came,
Reputed the best knight and goodliest man,
Ambassador, to lead her to his lord
Arthur, and led her forth, and far ahead
Of his and her retinue moving, they,
Rapt in sweet talk or lively, all on love
And sport and tilts and pleasure (for the time
Was maytime, and as yet no sin was dreamed,)
Rode under groves that look'd a paradise
Of blossom, over sheets of hyacinth
That seem'd the heavens upbreaking thro' the
 earth,
And on from hill to hill, and every day
Beheld at noon in some delicious dale
The silk pavilions of King Arthur raised
For brief repast or afternoon repose
By couriers gone before ; and on again,

GUINEVERE

Till yet once more ere set of sun they saw
The Dragon of the great Pendragonship,
That crown'd the state pavilion of the King,
Blaze by the rushing brook or silent well.

But when the Queen immersed in such a
trance,
And moving thro' the past unconsciously,
Came to that point, when first she saw the
King
Ride toward her from the city, sigh'd to find
Her journey done, glanced at him, thought
him cold,
High, self-contain'd, and passionless, not like
him,
'Not like my Lancelot'—while she brooded
thus
And grew half-guilty in her thoughts again,
There rode an armed warrior to the doors.
A murmuring whisper thro' the nunnery
ran,

GUINEVERE

Then on a sudden a cry, 'The King.' She sat
Stiff-stricken, listening; but when armed feet
Thro' the long gallery from the outer doors
Rang coming, prone from off her seat she fell,
And grovell'd with her face against the floor:
There with her milkwhite arms and shadowy
hair

She made her face a darkness from the King:
And in the darkness heard his armed feet
Pause by her; then came silence, then a
voice,

Monotonous and hollow like a Ghost's
Denouncing judgment, but tho' changed the
King's.

'Liest thou here so low, the child of one
I honour'd, happy, dead before thy shame?
Well is it that no child is born of thee.
The children born of thee are sword and fire,
Red ruin, and the breaking up of laws,
The craft of kindred and the Godless hosts

GUINEVERE

Of heathen swarming o'er the Northern Sea.
Whom I, while yet Sir Lancelot, my right
arm,

The mightiest of my knights, abode with me,
Have everywhere about this land of Christ
In twelve great battles ruining overthrown.
And knowest thou now from whence I come
—from him,

From waging bitter war with him : and he,
That did not shun to smite me in worse way,
Had yet that grace of courtesy in him left,
He spared to lift his hand against the King
Who made him knight : but many a knight
was slain ;

And many more, and all his kith and kin
Clave to him, and abode in his own land.
And many more when Modred raised revolt,
Forgetful of their troth and fealty, clave
To Modred, and a remnant stays with me.
And of this remnant will I leave a part,
True men who love me still, for whom I live,

GUINEVERE

To guard thee in the wild hour coming on,
Lest but a hair of this low head be harm'd.
Fear not : thou shalt be guarded till my death.
Howbeit I know, if ancient prophecies
Have err'd not, that I march to meet my doom.
Thou hast not made my life so sweet to me,
That I the King should greatly care to live ;
For thou hast spoilt the purpose of my life.
Bear with me for the last time while I show,
Ev'n for thy sake, the sin which thou hast
sinn'd.

For when the Roman left us, and their law
Relax'd its hold upon us, and the ways
Were fill'd with rapine, here and there a deed
Of prowess done redress'd a random wrong.
But I was first of all the kings who drew
The knighthood-errant of this realm and all
The realms together under me, their Head,
In that fair order of my Table Round,
A glorious company, the flower of men,
To serve as model for the mighty world,

GUINEVERE

And be the fair beginning of a time.
I made them lay their hands in mine and
swear
To reverence the King, as if he were
Their conscience, and their conscience as
their King,
To break the heathen and uphold the Christ,
To ride abroad redressing human wrongs,
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity,
To love one maiden only, cleave to her,
And worship her by years of noble deeds,
Until they won her ; for indeed I knew
Of no more subtle master under heaven
Than is the maiden passion for a maid,
Not only to keep down the base in man,
But teach high thought, and amiable words
And courtliness, and the desire of fame,
And love of truth, and all that makes a man.
And all this throve until I wedded thee !
Believing " lo mine helpmate, one to feel

GUINEVERE

My purpose and rejoicing in my joy."
Then came thy shameful sin with Lancelot ;
Then came the sin of Tristram and Isolt ;
Then others, following these my mightiest
knights,

And drawing foul ensample from fair names,
Sinn'd also, till the loathsome opposite
Of all my heart had destined did obtain,
And all thro' thee ! so that this life of mine
I guard as God's high gift from scathe and
wrong,

Not greatly care to lose ; but rather think
How sad it were for Arthur, should he live,
To sit once more within his lonely hall,
And miss the wonted number of my knights,
And miss to hear high talk of noble deeds
As in the golden days before thy sin.

For which of us, who might be left, could
speak

Of the pure heart, nor seem to glance at thee ?
And in thy bowers of Camelot or of Usk

GUINEVERE

Thy shadow still would glide from room to
room,

And I should evermore be vext with thee
In hanging robe or vacant ornament,

Or ghostly footfall echoing on the stair.

For think not, tho' thou would'st not love thy
lord,

Thy lord has wholly lost his love for thee.

I am not made of so slight elements.

Yet must I leave thee, woman, to thy shame.

I hold that man the worst of public foes

Who either for his own or children's sake,

To save his blood from scandal, lets the wife

Whom he knows false, abide and rule the
house :

For being thro' his cowardice allow'd

Her station, taken everywhere for pure,

She like a new disease, unknown to men,

Creeps, no precaution used, among the crowd,

Makes wicked lightnings of her eyes, and
saps

GUINEVERE

The fealty of our friends, and stirs the pulse
With devil's leaps, and poisons half the
young.

Worst of the worst were that man he that
reigns!

Better the King's waste hearth and aching
heart

Than thou reseated in thy place of light,
The mockery of my people, and their bane.'

He paused, and in the pause she crept an
inch

Nearer, and laid her hands about his feet.

Far off a solitary trumpet blew.

Then waiting by the doors the war-horse
neigh'd

As at a friend's voice, and he spake again.

'Yet think not that I come to urge thy
crimes,

I did not come to curse thee, Guinevere,

GUINEVERE

I, whose vast pity almost makes me die
To see thee, laying there thy golden head,
My pride in happier summers, at my feet.
The wrath which forced my thoughts on that
fierce law,

The doom of treason and the flaming death,
(When first I learnt thee hidden here) is
past.

The pang—which while I weigh'd thy heart
with one

Too wholly true to dream untruth in thee,
Made my tears burn—is also past, in part.

And all is past, the sin is sinn'd, and I,

Lo! I forgive thee, as Eternal God

Forgives: do thou for thine own soul the
rest.

But how to take last leave of all I loved?

O golden hair, with which I used to play

Not knowing! O imperial-moulded form,

And beauty such as never woman wore,

Until it came a kingdom's curse with thee—

GUINEVERE

I cannot touch thy lips, they are not mine,
But Lancelot's: nay, they never were the
King's.

I cannot take thy hand; that too is flesh,
And in the flesh thou hast sinn'd: and mine
own flesh,

Here looking down on thine polluted, cries
"I loathe thee:" yet not less, O Guinevere,
For I was ever virgin save for thee,
My love thro' flesh hath wrought into my
life

So far, that my doom is, I love thee still.
Let no man dream but that I love thee still.
Perchance, and so thou purify thy soul,
And so thou lean on our fair father Christ,
Hereafter in that world where all are pure
We two may meet before high God, and
thou

Wilt spring to me, and claim me thine, and
know

I am thine husband—not a smaller soul,

GUINEVERE

Nor Lancelot, nor another. Leave me that,
I charge thee, my last hope. Now must I
hence.

Thro' the thick night I hear the trumpet
blow :

They summon me their King to lead mine
hosts

Far down to that great battle in the west,
Where I must strike against my sister's son,
Leagued with the lords of the White Horse
and knights

Once mine, and strike him dead, and meet
myself

Death, or I know not what mysterious doom.
And thou remaining here wilt learn the event ;
But hither shall I never come again,
Never lie by thy side, see thee no more,
Farewell !'

And while she grovell'd at his feet,
She felt the King's breath wander o'er her
neck,



9.

And he gave them charge about the Queen

GUINEVERE

And, in the darkness o'er her fallen head,
Perceived the waving of his hands that blest.

Then, listening till those armed steps were
gone,
Rose the pale Queen, and in her anguish
found
The casement: 'Peradventure,' so she
thought,
'If I might see his face, and not be seen.'
And lo, he sat on horseback at the door!
And near him the sad nuns with each a light
Stood, and he gave them charge about the
Queen,
To guard and foster her for evermore.
And while he spake to these his helm was
lower'd,
To which for crest the golden dragon clung
Of Britain; so she did not see the face,
Which then was as an angel's, but she saw,
Wet with mists and smitten by the lights,

GUINEVERE

The Dragon of the great Pendragonship
Blaze, making all the night a steam of fire.
And even then he turn'd ; and more and more
The moony vapour rolling round the King,
Who seem'd the phantom of a Giant in it,
Enwound him fold by fold, and made him
 gray
And grayer, till himself became as mist
Before her, moving ghostlike to his doom.

Then she stretch'd out her arms and cried
 aloud
'Oh Arthur !' there her voice brake suddenly,
Then—as a stream that spouting from a cliff
Fails in mid air, but gathering at the base
Re-makes itself, and flashes down the vale—
Went on in passionate utterance.

 'Gone—my lord !
Gone thro' my sin to slay and to be slain !
And he forgave me, and I could not speak.
Farewell? I should have answer'd his farewell.

GUINEVERE

His mercy choked me. Gone, my lord the
King,

My own true lord! how dare I call him
mine?

The shadow of another cleaves to me,
And makes me one pollution: he, the King,
Call'd me polluted: shall I kill myself?

What help in that? I cannot kill my sin,
If soul be soul; nor can I kill my shame;
No, nor by living can I live it down.

The days will grow to weeks, the weeks to
months,

The months will add themselves and make
the years,

The years will roll into the centuries,
And mine will ever be a name of scorn.

I must not dwell on that defeat of fame.

Let the world be; that is but of the world.

What else? what hope? I think there was a
hope,

Except he mock'd me when he spake of hope;

GUINEVERE

His hope he call'd it ; but he never mocks,
For mockery is the fume of little hearts.
And blessed be the King, who hath forgiven
My wickedness to him, and left me hope
That in mine own heart I can live down sin
And be his mate hereafter in the heavens
Before high God. Ah great and gentle lord,
Who wast, as is the conscience of a saint
Among his warring senses, to thy knights—
To whom my false voluptuous pride, that
took
Full easily all impressions from below,
Would not look up, or half-despised the
height
To which I would not or I could not climb—
I thought I could not breathe in that fine
air,
That pure severity of perfect light—
I wanted warmth and colour which I found
In Lancelot—now I see thee what thou art,
Thou art the highest and most human too,

GUINEVERE

Not Lancelot, nor another. Is there none
Will tell the King I love him tho' so late?
Now — ere he goes to the great Battle?
none :

Myself must tell him in that purer life,
But now it were too daring. Ah, my God,
What might I not have made of thy fair
world,

Had I but loved thy highest creature here?

It was my duty to have loved the highest :

It surely was my profit had I known :

It would have been my pleasure had I seen.

We needs must love the highest when we
see it,

Not Lancelot, nor another.

Here her hand

Grasp'd, made her vail her eyes : she look'd
and saw

The novice, weeping, suppliant, and said to
her,

' Yea, little maid, for am I not forgiven ?'

GUINEVERE

Then glancing up beheld the holy nuns
All round her, weeping ; and her heart was
loosed
Within her, and she wept with these and
said :

‘Ye know me then, that wicked one, who
broke

The vast design and purpose of the King.
O shut me round with narrowing nunnery-
walls,
Meek maidens, from the voices crying
“Shame.”

I must not scorn myself : he loves me still.
Let no one dream but that he loves me still.
So let me, if you do not shudder at me
Nor shun to call me sister, dwell with you ;
Wear black and white, and be a nun like
you ;
Fast with your fasts, not feasting with your
feasts :



9.

. . . There, an Abbess, lived
For three brief years . . .

GUINEVERE

Grieve with your griefs, not grieving at your
joys,

But not rejoicing ; mingle with your rites ;
Pray and be pray'd for ; lie before your
shrines ;

Do each low office of your holy house ;
Walk your dim cloister, and distribute dole
To poor sick people, richer in his eyes
Who ransom'd us, and haler too than I ;
And treat their loathsome hurts and heal
mine own ;

And so wear out in almsdeed and in prayer
The sombre close of that voluptuous day,
Which wrought the ruin of my lord the
King.'

She said: they took her to themselves ; and
she
Still hoping, fearing 'is it yet too late ?'
Dwelt with them, till in time their Abbess
died.

GUINEVERE

Then she, for her good deeds and her pure
 life,
And for the power of ministration in her,
And likewise for the high rank she had borne,
Was chosen Abbess, there, an Abbess, lived
For three brief years, and there, an Abbess,
 past
To where beyond these voices there is peace.

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Tennyson, Alfred Tennyson
Guinevere

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